



Are our school playgrounds being wrapped in cotton wool?

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For fear of injury and lack of space, playgrounds are becoming unimaginative and uninspiring. Ron McDonald/Flickr, CC BY-SA


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[New research](#) has found that fears of playground accidents such as falls has led to considerable changes in school playgrounds, reflecting a climate of over-policing and surplus rules and regulations. This month it [was reported](#) that a father is suing his son's school for a playground accident in which his son ran into a wall.

With schools increasingly facing litigation for accidents on their playgrounds, protecting students from physical dangers is becoming paramount. The leading cause of children being hospitalised – [38% of child hospitalisations in 2011/2012](#) – is physical play injuries.

However, wrapping kids in cotton wool does not allow them to develop the essential skills of risk-taking, learning from mistakes, problem-solving and facing challenges and failures. Such trial and error can be fundamental to negotiating life's challenges and overcoming them.

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Disclosure statement

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How playgrounds are changing

Schools across Australia are changing their play rules to shorten play times (such as lunch and recess breaks), eliminating play spaces (such as trees, fixed equipment, tyres) to make room for classroom space, merging facilities to severely reduce play space, and implementing rules that restrict creative, diverse and active play (such as running, cartwheels, kicking and throwing balls).

[Playground activities in many schools](#) have become more policed, organised, structured and adult-directed. The age at which children are permitted to play unsupervised has been increasing; there is an increased likelihood children will be driven or accompanied during their play activities; and play activities are becoming more adult-organised and indoors.



Most school play areas these days look something like this: not much room for games or equipment to get injured on. And nothing fun to play with. Carl Spencer/Flickr, CC BY

Why restricted play is a bad thing

Students can lose their confidence in physical activity if there is a growing culture of adult overprotection. Many Australian [studies](#) and [reports](#) describe the harmful influences on students from a culture of “surplus safety”.

School playgrounds that are more student-directed, encourage unstructured play freedom and possess less rules [have resulted](#) in [improved playground behaviours](#) and [reduced occurrence of injury](#).

Students I interviewed for my research reported boredom can lead to frustration and anger, which can lead to injuries in the school playground. Restricting student opportunities to overcome school playground risks can have the opposite effect for teachers who seek to create an environment protected from danger.

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[Some research out of Sydney](#) reported that parents are often unaware that restricting child's play could have [negative effects](#) on a child's [cognitive health (such as mental health impairment) and social development (such as bullying).

Let kids play free

Playgrounds that are less restrictive [can enhance student engagement](#) with and learning of a [range of physical, cognitive and social skills](#).

Students often perceive that overcoming elements of danger is an important aspect of school playground activities. By students taking risks, they enhance engagement, decrease boredom and provide movement opportunities to confidently improve physical activity habits.

The introduction of loose parts within a school playground is an emerging student-directed strategy to provide a variety of play options and choices for students to ensure playground boredom is prevented.



Introducing moving parts to playgrounds means kids can be creative and don't get bored. Author Provided, Author provided

Loose parts materials such as milk crates, hay bales and tyre tubes (such as via the [LEAP program in regional Victoria](#), a whole-school playground of loose parts materials) allow students to develop their own school playground areas and activities, using low-risk, movable obstacles to creatively engage in an imaginative and diverse range of activities.

Teachers originally perceived there would be increased safety risks associated with using loose parts materials, yet [decreased injuries and misbehaviour](#) were reported within both the LEAP intervention and Sydney playground project.



Loose play items like crates and hay bales are positive for improving injury rates and misbehaviour. Author provided, Author provided

A school in New Zealand trialled reducing school playground rules that related to risks of children getting hurt or making a mess. This included rules banning the building of huts, riding skateboards and scooters, climbing trees, play fighting, sliding down mudslides, using stair rails as monkey bars and restricting students to certain areas. They found [positive effects including](#) reduced injuries and misbehaviour.

Reducing this increasing focus on safety rules and restrictions could be vital to ensuring the health, learning and development of our next generation.

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Henry GRAY

Retired Principal and part time Lecturer/Tutor at Charles Darwin University

This is a great and very timely article. As as ex-Principal of primary schools for four decades, it has saddened me that play has become so sterile. This has largely been forced by fear of litigation ashould things go wrong. However 'controlled' play takes from children the chance to make decisions, take risks, be emboldened and to simply enjoy themselves in the playground. Yes, care and common sense are needed but we don't need safety standards and controlling regulations that go over the top and freeze the enjoyment and spontaneity in play.

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